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The Momentum of the Unthinkable

In the 40 years since the first atomic bomb exploded in the New Mexico desert, the world has rushed headlong down the path of nuclear proliferation. So far, the possession of nuclear weapons by five major powers has acted as a successful deterrent.

But the possibility is growing that the nuclear arsenal is getting out of control. Familiarity seems to have bred contempt for the consequences of a nuclear exchange; officials in Washington, and presumably in the other nuclear-power capitals, are thinking what was once called the unthinkable.

Consider the testimony of a top Strategic Air Command general at a closed session of the Senate Armed Services Committee. According to the transcript, classified "secret," he made the obligatory bow to "the complex interaction of many elements" that add up to deterrence, but then said ominously:

"However, should deterrence fail between strategic nuclear powers, all but one of these factors become irrelevant, and we must then look to the ultimate measure of merit: raw military power."

The general then proceeded, through 41 pages of testimony, to plead the case for deploying hundreds and even thousands more nuclear warheads in this country and abroad.

We doubt that even the experts of the Strategic Air Command, let alone President Reagan and his advisers, have a clear idea of just how extensive the world's nuclear arsenal has become. A fresh picture is presented in a new book, "Nuclear Battlefields: Global Links in the Arms Race" by William Arkin and Richard Fieldhouse. The book is sure to create an uproar in Congress and the Pentagon, and will probably touch off antinuclear demonstrations and an FBI investigation. But the furor should not obscure the serious purpose of the book: to give the public enough facts for an informed debate.

With a minimum of rhetoric and a maximum of mind-numbing facts and figures, the book sets out to list every nuclear warhead and every facility related to the production and deployment of nuclear weapons. Though the amount of classified information on Soviet nukes is impressive, the authors can be faulted for inadequate treatment of other Soviet areas, such as civil defense. Nor is there any mention of Israel's nuclear arsenal.

The greatest shock for most Americans will be the discovery that there are nuclear warheads practically in their backyard. Only 22 states and the District of Columbia have no nuclear warheads within their borders.

The authors have prepared a chart that ranks the states by the number of warheads and also by nuclear facilities.

South Carolina heads the list, with 1,962 warheads. The Navy weapons station at Charleston stores 1,482 warheads.

No. 2 is New York, with 1,900 warheads, most of them at the Seneca Army Depot in the Finger Lakes region.

The rest of the Top 10 and the number of nuclear warheads in each are North Dakota (1,510), California (1,437), Washington state (1,172), Michigan and Texas (630 each), Virginia (542), Louisiana (530) and Arkansas (430).

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